Last of the Bigtime Builders

Welcome to downtown Toronto, where you can barely see the sky for the scrapers. Gaze up at the monumental efforts of architects Bregman and Hamann. And ask yourself: Is this good or is it a pain in the neck?

By Margaret Drury Gane

A couple of years ago, a panel of guests on Peter Gzowski's *This Country in the Morning* was asked to decide which profession had made the greatest impact on the quality of life for ordinary citizens. There were the obvious choices: space science, medicine, computer technology. Less expected and infinitely more contentious was one guest's prompt selection: architecture.

Considering the non-stop building boom of the past 25 years, the choice was a good one. Though the construction phenomenon swept every major Canadian city, few have seen more radical changes than Toronto, whose older citizens remember the 1950s and 1960s as a kind of demolition derby. Dump trucks, pile drivers, cranes and pneumatic drills created chaos which, with astonishing speed, gave way to towering glass-and-concrete buildings. For many, future shock became present trauma. "What the *hell* are they doing to my city?" a streetcar driver once grumbled to me. "Who asked *me* if I liked it?"

The new buildings were deplored by traditionalists and defended by radical moderns. The irony of it is that few of either group knew who had paid for the buildings, let alone designed them. But then, architects are the last professionals to retain an aura of mystery. They seem not quite of this earth.

No two men could be less mystical or more business-oriented than Sydney Bregman and George Hamann, the men most responsible for the transformation of Toronto's downtown core. There are Bregman and Hamann buildings all over the city, but nowhere is their impact more visible than in the $1 billion worth of construction downtown, within one square mile: the Toronto Dominion Centre; the Royal Trust Tower; the Simpsons Tower; the Commercial Union Tower; the First Bank Tower, 72 stories high and part of the $200 million block-wide First Canadian Place complex. Harbour Square has been applauded for design but resented for its view-blocking bulk on the waterfront. In one way or another, Bregman and Hamann had an impressive hand in all of these buildings: their latest blockbuster being the $250 million Eaton Centre, which is not loved by everyone despite its ice-cream curves and airy interior. "It looks like a beached float from Eaton's Santa Claus parade," said one unimpressed shopper. Still, it's a breakaway from the stark coldness of many earlier efforts by Bregman and Hamann.

According to George Hamann, their buildings have only one distinguishing feature: efficiency. "We get our buildings in on time and under budget," he says. That may not be art, but in the 1950s, speed tended to impress developers more than art. The St. Lawrence Seaway had opened Toronto to world commerce; men, money and materials were freed from wartime restrictions. Land could be bought cheaply and developed quickly and architects lucky enough to work for newly-spawned developers like Olympia & York, Cadillac Construction and Fairview Corporation (later to join Cadillac to become one of Canada's biggest developers) made fortunes. And, as writer Trent Frayne observed, "Nobody was in there faster with a wheelbarrow of cement than a pair of University of Toronto graduates, Syd Bregman and George Hamann."

Their timing couldn't have been better. Bregman and Hamann liked to think big; once they linked with money that built big, they were like a couple of tornadoes unleashed on a flat stretch of land. Resistance was nil and the momentum staggering. If their grand design was frustrated at first, good connections and time soon set it in motion. "Like any firm starting out," Bregman remembers, "we had to do a lot of nonsense, unimportant projects like housing. Well, obviously housing isn't unimportant, but our scope was limited because of finances. Sure we did smaller contracts, but we were ambitious for bigger things."

Their first big breakthrough was the Toronto Dominion Centre, designed by architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, and begun in 1966. Bregman and Hamann and John B. Parkin Associates (with Bregman in as the executive architect) were retained to oversee what was to be the largest office complex ever attempted in Canada. It was a feat of speed as well as daring. "People don't realize how incredibly fast that building was done," says Bregman, who points out that in New York similar structures took 10 years to build. "Ours was done in three." That impressed developers, who paid their men by the hour, and the trend toward abstract rectangles began in earnest.

What nobody in the business seemed to hear, however, was the growing rumble of discontent from people who had to walk around the base of the new high-rises. Eyes red with blown grit, clutching coats and parcels in the tunnelled winds, they scurried past the architectural innovations in neither the mood nor the condition to stop and admire. Stephen McLaughlin, past chairman of the Toronto Chapter of Architects, now a policy adviser to Mayor

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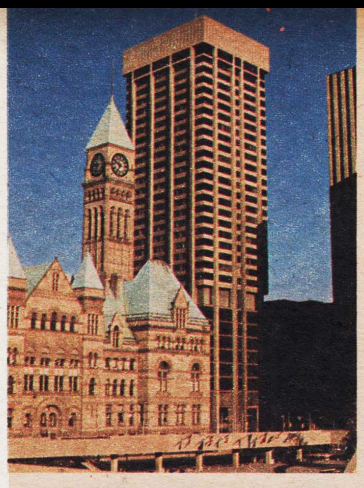
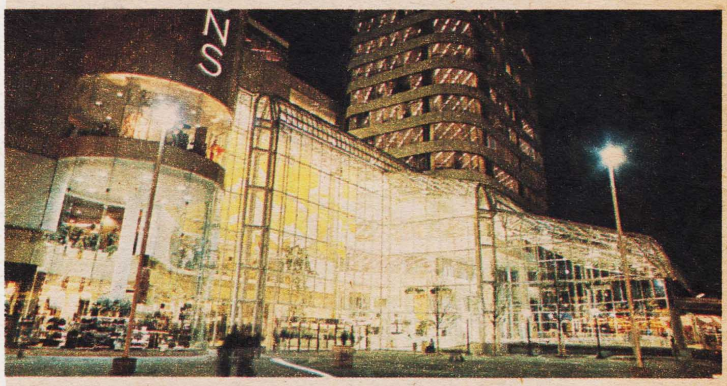
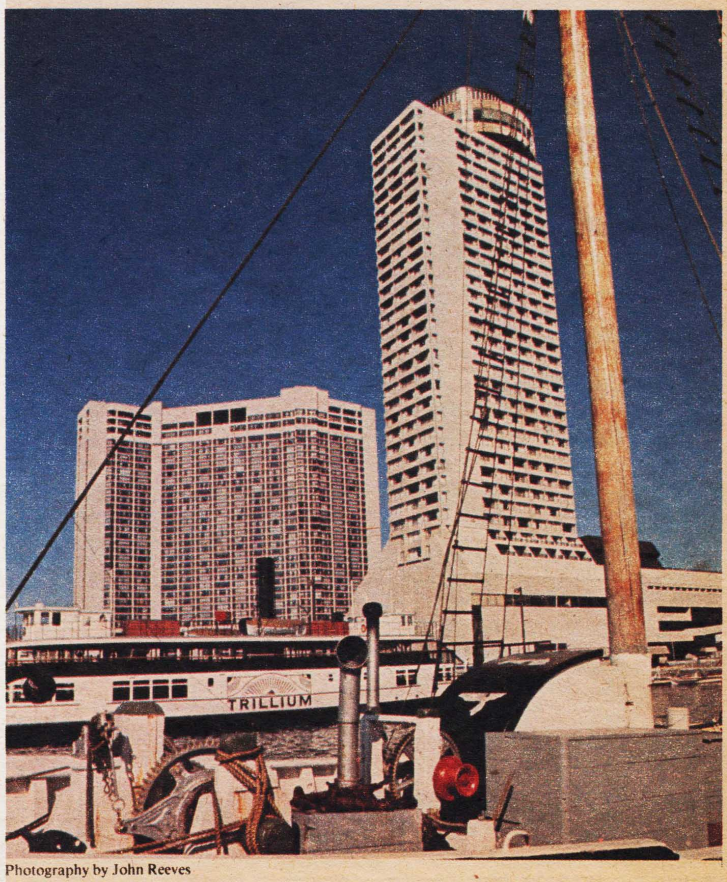
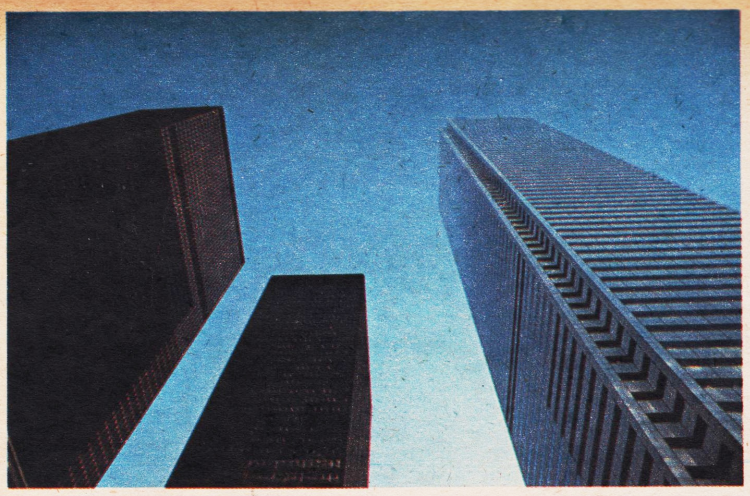


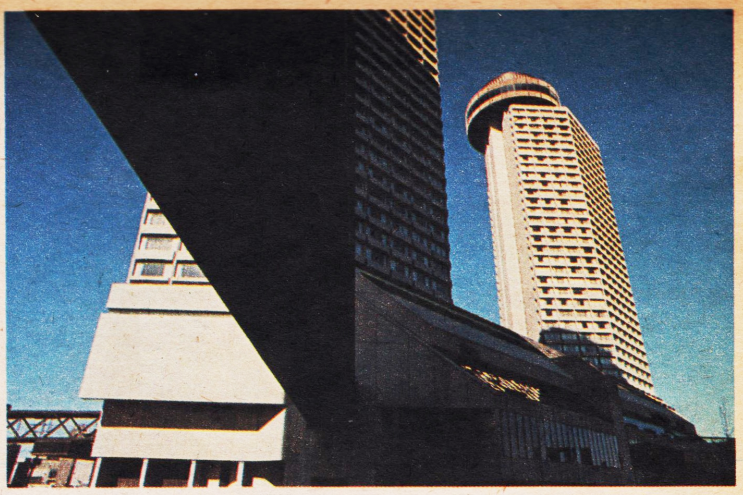


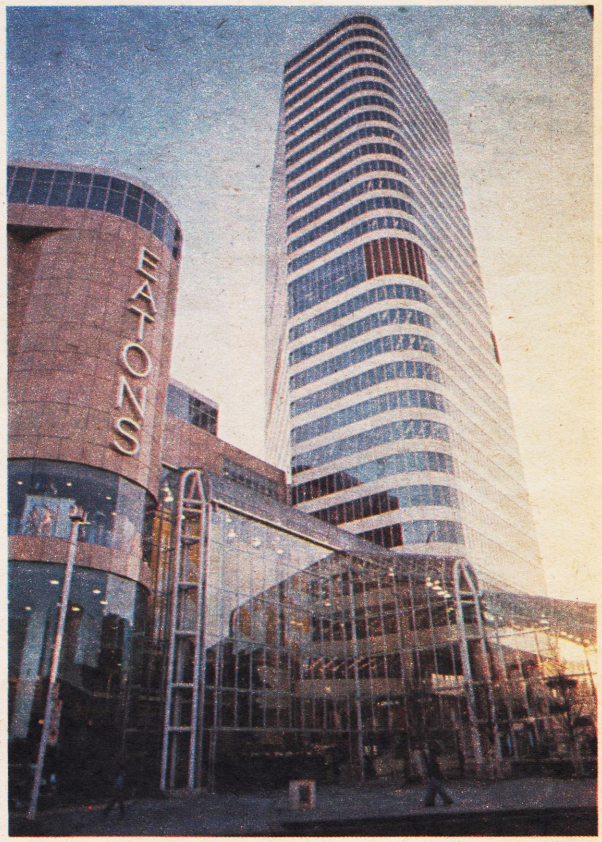


The core of the small apple: Critics say Toronto developers are creating a mini-New York. The Simpsons Tower (left) contrasts sharply with Old City Hall which stands alone as a reminder of the past. Other Bregman and Hamann ventures include the dazzling new Eaton Centre (below), the Harbour Square complex (bottom) which looms over the waterfront, and the three fingers of the Toronto Dominion Centre (opposite page).

Photography by John Reeves







High over Hogtown: The $250-million Eaton Centre (above) marks a departure from the stark style of earlier Bregman and Hamann projects like the Toronto Dominion Centre (top left and opposite page). The Harbour Square hotel and apartment complex (top right) has been praised for its design but damned for its view-blocking bulk. The First Bank Tower (left), part of the $200-million First Canadian Place, rises 72 storeys above City Hall's Nathan Phillips Square.

Crombie, says, "Skyscrapers would be fine if we always viewed them from an airplane, or on a postcard. Down below, they can kill a city."

There were other criticisms. Overshadowing made sunless corridors of the downtown streets. Most of the new buildings looked drearily similar, duplicated both within the city and around the world. Carried to the extreme, this could mean that London, Chicago, Tokyo and Toronto — once distinctive and unique — would eventually look depressingly alike. Psychologists worried that urban folk would become hostile, or isolated, because they'd lost familiar landmarks and neighborhoods. More than 100 historic buildings were demolished during Toronto's building boom. There were bitter accusations that this happened because city officials were in the developers' pockets.

Discontent was unorganized at first, and Toronto continued its headlong rush to become, as one American magazine later called it, "a mini-New York." It seemed that most Torontonians, looking enviously upward at New York's dazzling skyline, hadn't noticed the suicidal decline below. At the heart of the Big Apple was a slowly rotting core, a thought that may once have prompted Sir Winston Churchill to observe: "We shape our buildings; thereafter, they shape us."

In the 1960s, a few people sensed this and determined to make their concern known. Brush fires began with residents' associations, ratepayers' groups and small but vocal pockets of resistance trying to impede development. The heat these groups generated was minimal and generally ignored, until the emergence of David Crombie. Crombie, a refreshingly casual ex-teacher, decided to run for mayor on a reform ticket in the 1972 municipal elections. Ambling comfortably through old downtown streets in turtle-necked sweater and jeans, he slowly drew these unrelated groups into a solid wall of opposition by promising to preserve historic buildings and neighborhoods, to reform city hall, to keep the waterfront for people, and to end unplanned, non-stop development. All people had to do was vote him in as mayor, along with a slate of aldermen and councillors who agreed with his objections. The people listened: Crombie was voted in by a strong, 24,000-vote majority, with a clear mandate to control the boom.

Most major developers, still able to continue contracts passed under the previous administration, refused at first to take Crombie seriously. He was politically inexperienced, they said, given to naive overstatements: a babe in the woods wooing an electorate with what he thought they wanted to hear.

But, before the mayor's chain of office had settled around his neck, Crombie set about keeping his campaign promises. His bluntly honest manner made him publicly adored by voters and privately detested by developers. Bylaws became the Crombie zap-gun, and he used them with breathtaking speed: bylaws to protect what was left of Toronto's architectural history; zoning bylaws to protect property; and the most lethal of all, a bylaw prohibiting any building over the height of 45 feet for a period of two years, thought to be enough time for the city to formulate a comprehensive development and planning scheme of its own. When the Ontario Municipal Board (OMB) ruled this illegal, Crombie promptly retaliated by refusing to issue building permits — a city prerogative — for any building exceeding that height.

And so the battle lines were drawn. Outraged developers clumped into a regiment of resistance. Architects whose prime work had been tall office structures clung quietly to the developers' stand, though publicly pretending it was business as usual.

It wasn't. Gone were palmy days and the nice solid feeling that city hall was in agreement with just about any development scheme that meant more growth, more people and more revenue. Contracts were drying up, and suddenly even Bregman and Hamann discovered that there were fewer places to go with the wheelbarrow.

"Ten years ago," says George Hamann, "you could go to the city, get the permit and be on the job within a few months. Now there are so many committees, presentations and reviews to go through that it's become a big monster." That's one reason why Hamann has emerged from a comfortably low profile in the past two years to get out and around town with a message for influential businessmen who might put some muscle behind a campaign to outwit city hall. It's also a campaign to prevent Bregman and Hamann from becoming the last of the bigtime builders.

Last October, George Hamann addressed his fellow members of the Rotary Club of Toronto at a luncheon in the Royal York's plush concert hall. If his pale beige leisure suit stood out in the sea of darkly elegant tailoring around him, it also conveyed the image of a modern, with-it, business-oriented architect, an impression Hamann carefully cultivates. His speech opened with a brief discussion of architectural philosophy, but quickly became a PR pitch aimed squarely at the pocketbooks and the politics of the powerful. The main event was *Spaces for People*, an eight-minute film lavish with praise for Bregman and Hamann buildings, usually shown to clients. As Hamann wound up his speech, its point became clear: Bregman and Hamann had had a hefty hand in creating Toronto as it now stands, but all this took place some time ago, when development meant free enterprise and progress. Now that development has stopped, Hamann's speech implied, progress has also stopped. To get things moving again, the audience must voice their concern to city hall.

The applause was generous, though not deafening. Still, it encouraged George Hamann to plan other speaking engagements. "A later speech," his secretary told me, "was a good deal tougher."

Both Sydney Bregman and George Hamann were born in Toronto, and raised in homes where immigrant parents rarely had enough money to manage necessities, much less the luxuries both men enjoy now. Hamann has a beautiful suburban home and a renovated stone farmhouse in the country, collects Canadiana, and once took his family all the way to Bangkok to watch his daughter play tournament table tennis. Bregman avidly acquires oriental rugs and is an expert yachtsman who, a few years back, helped Canada win the Freeman Cup. But with background and affluent lifestyle, the similarities end.

Where Hamann is affable, urgently energetic and at home with people, Sydney Bregman is the utterly practical administrator who prefers conservative suits and brisk conversations in which nobody becomes too familiar: he once became angry when an article written about the firm referred to him as "Syd." He has a gruff, hand-on-the-till competence that swiftly shatters the myth that architects began as dreamy kids, forever doodling on notebooks and redesigning the school. The idea, in fact, makes Bregman laugh. "No, I wasn't a bit like that. But there was always a drive to *be* something, to go further..." The war postponed Bregman's ambition; he enlisted with the RCAF and eventually became a Spitfire pilot. "When I got out, I knew the government would pay for my education, and a counsellor suggested architecture since I'd taken drafting in high school." He met the younger George Hamann at the University of Toronto, and after graduation they formed their own company. Equal partners with complementary qualities.

It was a lucky and talented combination, bound to thrive in the atmosphere of those times; nobody would be happier than Bregman and Hamann if they could continue that way forever. But the Crombie administration has changed everything. The city's plan for smaller-scale buildings is enough to send shivers down the back of anyone who's made his reputation with high-density office towers, but the idea of downtown housing rouses even the affable Hamann to annoyance.

"Would *you* want to live downtown?" he asks. "You'd come home late at night and you'd be looking at what's essentially a series of very forbidding streets. Not a very nice environment for young people."

City planners counter that the ghost-town eeriness described by Hamann was brought about by the soaring structures formerly erected without plan or consideration. More of the same, they say, would be a disaster. The new Downtown Plan (the city's comprehensive proposal now before the OMB) stresses more green parks, retention of homes worth renovating, multi-use new buildings that would keep the human element alive and well in the downtown core and avoid New York City's monstrous errors. So it seems that the city's quarrel is not with development, but with the quality

of life it creates. Neither Bregman nor Hamann disagree with humanizing concepts, only with where it's going to happen and who has a say in how it must look. According to them, city hall has no business meddling in the affairs of architects. "This so-called input from all groups leaves me cold," Bregman declares.

This is such a sore point with Bregman in particular that he erupts with a distinctly god-like possessiveness. "It wastes time, and delays are costly. We architects, this is *our* city, and as professionals we know as well as those so-called planners what is good for it. After all, who created what we're all so proud of? Not the politicians and planners. They weren't around in the last 20 years to make Toronto what it is today."

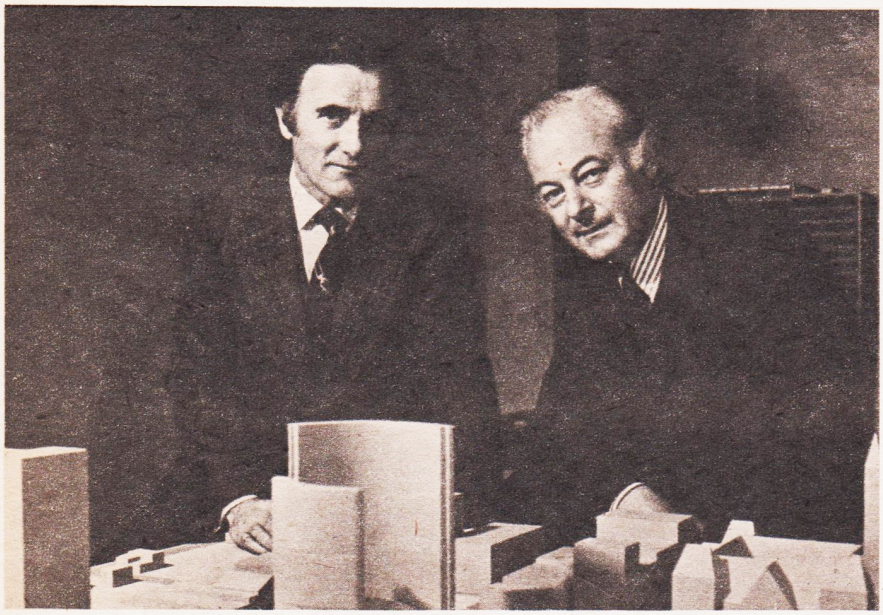
Well, it's hardly that simple. During Bregman's and Hamann's heyday, city administrations were so sympathetic to developers that the Crombie executive was bound to seem positively repressive by contrast. And while some architects decry city planners' threats to oversee their designs, architects have always had to compromise, by adapting their inspirations to the client's budget, time and the building requirements. The Downtown Plan offers overall guidelines to replace unrelated, individual efforts, yet many businessmen, Bregman and Hamann included, go so far as to view the proposed plan as a socialist plot. In the privacy of a panelled elevator, one man suggested to me that journalists would be well advised to look into early political activities of elected officials. "Most were definitely left wing," he said. And only a few days later a high-ranking real estate executive intoned: "As long as we have a free society, we can't say, 'Don't build offices, build homes,'" implying that democracy would be more secure in the hands of self-policing developers than it would in those of elected representatives.

However, the fate of the city plan is now up to the Ontario Municipal Board, which must wrestle with complex submissions, hear legal arguments for both sides, and finally decide who is right. Though Bregman and Hamann won't submit their own objections before the OMB, they hardly need to, since a battery of lawyers will represent, among other powerful organizations, the Toronto Real Estate Board, Campeau Corporation, the Board of Trade, Cadillac-Fairview, and Eaton Properties, Limited. Three of these have had intimate business dealings with Bregman and Hamann in the past, and all share the same concerns. The Toronto Chapter of Architects will enter its own objections as well, though it is by no means representative of all architects. "It may give the impression of speaking for all of us," says a young Toronto architect, "but it doesn't. Architects are divided on this."

Ironically, one who feels comfortable with the new trend is Allan Rae, who just happens to be one of Bregman and Hamann's most valued architects. "I've liked working with a firm that specializes in big concepts, of course. But the approach to urban design is changing, and I'm all for it. I agree with Crombie's attitude to downtown."

On a table in George Hamann's spacious office, there's a picture of two bug-eyed Chihuahuas, clinging fearfully to one another. Underneath, it says, "It's You and Me against the World," which may sum up the way Sydney Bregman and George Hamann feel right now. They've had to let a couple of draftsmen go, and have been turning away graduate architects with reluctant regularity. Things are busy, but not bustling, at their five-storey Don Mills office. ("It's one thing to build high-rises," says one employee, "and another to work in one.")

And so George Hamann fights back, trying to prove that you *can* beat city hall. If he is trying to restore the tone and triumphs of the good old days, he is also quietly hedging his bets. The downtown monoliths are being downplayed in favour of smaller projects the firm has designed. The accent on people comes into conversations and PR publications, cannily capitalizing on the spirit of the times. So the firm that began small and built big may end up reversing that order — if that's what it takes to stay afloat. For Bregman and Hamann have always been survivors. The end of an era may not be that hard to take; whenever Sydney Bregman and George Hamann want to see their own monuments, they have only to look up.◁



Hamann (left) and Bregman: "We architects, this is *our* city...we know as well as the so-called planners what is good for it."